

Thousands gather in Michigan to oppose education cuts

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Several thousand teachers, students and other workers came together at the state capitol building in Lansing, Michigan on Saturday in opposition to cuts in public education.

In recent days, the Republican-controlled legislature has either passed or put into motion bills that will have a devastating impact on schools and communities in the state and accelerate the already brutal cuts imposed over the last decade.

The measures include requiring employees to pay 20 percent or more of the cost of their health plans, forcing school districts to solicit private companies for certain services and eliminating many aspects of collective bargaining.

Saturday's event was called jointly by the Michigan Education Association (MEA) and the Democratic Party-backed We Are The People coalition, but the protests drew many students and broad layers of the working class who are opposed to the austerity measures being enacted at the local, state and federal level.

Socialist Equality Party supporters distributed the SEP statement "Public Education is a social right!" which calls for the development of a political movement of the working class, independent of the Democrats, Republicans and the trade unions, to fight to defend education and other social rights

Rob, a Waterford middle school teacher, said, "I'm here today because teachers are being made public enemy number one. We're being scapegoated. It's not a revenue problem, it's a spending problem. And it's not just at the state level. There's not enough money for schools because of the tax cuts for the rich and fighting the wars."

Steve, a social studies teacher at a small Michigan

school district, which is laying off 48 teachers, told the WSWS, "That we spend more on prisons than education speaks to where the priorities lie. Now they have reduced the cuts to \$200 per pupil—but when you're operating on nothing, how can we take any cuts?"

"It's frustrating. There is an alternate goal with these politics. They created the Emergency Financial Manager, and it seems like they are only good at creating financial emergencies."

Governor Rick Snyder recently signed into law a measure that gives so-called Emergency Financial Managers (EFM) dictatorial powers to tear up existing labor agreements, sell off public assets and usurp elected bodies. The policy—which was originally initiated by Snyder's Democratic predecessor, Jennifer Granholm—is currently being used in the Detroit schools and Benton Harbor, and the governor has threatened to use it in scores of other school districts to impose drastic cutbacks and attacks on public employees.

Cynthia, a reading specialist at Reeths-Puffer Public School in north Muskegon, said, "We need money for social programs at home that is being spent on war. My district is cutting one teacher at every grade level. This means that students in four classrooms will be squeezed into three.

"I just found out my job is one of those being cut. I've taught for 10 years, and this is it. I teach reading to the lowest of the low reading level students. The cuts will result in more crowded classrooms, hurting the most vulnerable kids. I teach kids who come from poor families, kids living with their grandparents because their parents can't find work.

"It's insanity. They say there's no money. There's money, it's a matter of how it's being spent. Education is a basic need. The right to education goes back to the

founding fathers, that democracy needs an educated populace as a safeguard against tyranny. I can't believe what they are doing. Teachers are not well paid, but we're a section of society that is still able to pay our bills, buy a home. They want to do away with that."

Teachers were given no lead from the union officials who spoke from the platform. On the contrary, they sought to channel popular opposition to the cuts into support for the Democratic Party proposing recall efforts, lobbying legislators and a get-out-the-vote campaign for Obama and other Democrats in 2012.

Michigan Education Association President Ira Salters praised two Democratic state representatives in the crowd and added, "This fight doesn't end until November 6, 2012, when we are going to elect true friends of labor and the middle-class. These days prove to us that elections do have consequences, but so do the votes in legislature. We brought them here, we can get them out."

Other union officials repeated this theme, including United Auto Workers President Bob King, who suggested that workers were responsible for the current situation because they had voted Republican in the last election. He gave no explanation of why support for the Democrats had collapsed and joined the effort to conceal the fact that the Democrats, from the White House to the state and local level, were currently attacking workers no less viciously than their Republican counterparts.

The campaign for Democrats is aimed blocking any serious struggle against Snyder and the Republicans. The union officials' aim is not to stop budget cuts and attacks on teachers—with which they fully agree—but to assure that they have a seat at the table to impose them on their members. In this way the upper-middle-class managers who run the unions can ensure their continued dues income and high salaries. This includes MEA President Salters, who received total compensation of nearly \$300,000—up 15 percent from the previous year—while teachers lose jobs and suffer pay freezes and cuts.

Ronald Kruger, a retired UAW worker from Lansing, expressed the growing anger against the union officialdom. "The UAW has a tent over there but they aren't really doing anything. They don't fight because they're in with the corporations. I asked them, 'Are you going to do something about this?' and our local union president said, 'We're thinking about doing something.' My god!—'thinking about doing something'?"

Ronald added, "There needs to be a general strike. One day before too much longer there's going to be teargas fired on a mass demonstration right here in this yard. But

that's what it's going to take."

Chuck Denton, a journalism student at Washtenaw Community College, told the WSWS, "Our nation is being gutted, its jobs and economic base, and now it's got down to the teacher level. I don't think they are done yet."

Speaking of the Snyder administration, he continued, "He's clearly a venture capitalist. That's the way he acts and proceeds. He does not see the big picture. He just sees the cash flow. So he is acting as spreadsheet management, short term, short sighted.

"He is pillaging our village for his corporate interests. The Democrats have got me disappointed and confused, because I always thought they were the party for the people. As I grew up through the years it has become more and more apparent that they are easily purchased as well. It is hard to understand, where does their loyalty lie?"

A teacher from the lower thumb area of Michigan said, "I came with a busload of co-educators from the Port Huron area and basically I wanted to come and see who was out here and talk to fellow educators about their conditions.

"Right now there is an attack on education from the East to the West Coast. There is an attack on collective bargaining as a whole that affects both state workers and teachers. I don't think that is right. I am trying to link up with other people who feel the same to find a sense of direction to push forward.

"[Obama's] Race to the Top is devastating, because we are constantly having to teach to tests. It is a societal issue. Our system is not providing what the people need. It is a human right to have a job. It is all so corporations can make more money than they are already making."



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